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BEYOND CLAUSEWITZ

BETTER WAYS OF THINKING STRATEGICALLY

John Stone

Clausewitz has much to tell us about strategy. However, his most fundamental and enduring insights are obscured by his problematic theorizing about war in general. Essentially the same insights have been more clearly and economically articulated in the fields of political philosophy and game theory. As such, these literatures provide a more accessible introduction to the basics of strategy. The real value of Clausewitz resides in his profound understanding of how basic strategic dynamics play out in the specific context of war.

INTRODUCTION

Readers will, I hope, take my title with a grain of salt. It is principally intended as a hook on which to draw people in, and which hopefully has snagged you too. That said, the purpose of this essay is to explore some serious problems with Clausewitz's theory of war that have not attracted the attention they deserve. These problems have important implications for Clausewitz scholarship generally, although my aim here is to examine the difficulties they pose for anyone seeking to understand the fundamentals of military strategy. For although Clausewitz certainly appreciated the dynamics shaping choices about the use of military means for political ends, his key insights in this regard remain submerged within a complicated, and ultimately problematic, engagement with the subject of war itself. As such, there are better starting places for those wishing to grasp these matters, although a qualified reading of *On*

War remains very valuable for understanding the specific influences present in the context of military operations. What I am really doing, then, is not so much going beyond Clausewitz as beginning somewhere else first.¹

Clausewitz has suffered from his fair share of detractors over the years. Jomini declared him too abstruse to be of value to soldiers, whilst Liddell Hart subsequently denounced him for exaggerating the centrality of battle to warfare.² More recently he has been criticized for over-emphasizing the political instrumentality of war, and for lacking relevance to wars involving non-state actors.³ With the exception of Jomini (himself hardly a model of clarity), none of these criticisms can really be considered to have struck home. Indeed, one of the most impressive features of Clausewitz's work is its continuing relevance across a wide range of historical contexts.

Despite Clausewitz's many strengths, however, we should be careful to acknowledge certain serious shortcomings with his theory of war, which remained unresolved at his death. If the argument he famously set out in the first chapter of *On War* feels unduly complicated and poorly structured, it is because it is just that. Although he pronounced himself satisfied with the result, and intended to revise the rest of his book accordingly, he was wrong to do so.⁴ As such, Raymond Aron is too generous when he lauds the chapter for "the perfection of its rigorous analysis."

It allows us [he continues] to imagine what the work could have been had the author lived a few more years. It also indicates the last steps of a train of thought seeking its final expression. Fortunately, for the attentive reader, it reveals the entire conceptual network that structures Clausewitz's theoretical stance.⁵

To be sure, reading Chapter One can help us imagine a very different book. But that book would in practice have required a new starting point, because there is no reaching it from where Clausewitz left off. If the chapter contains "the last steps of a chain of thought", it is a

chain that reaches no satisfactory conclusion; if it exposes Clausewitz's "entire conceptual network", it is one that is fundamentally flawed.

In the next section I review Clausewitz's argument in order to highlight some of its problems. To be clear: I am not seeking to chart the development of his thinking about war, or to locate it within the broader intellectual currents of German idealist philosophy. These things have been done before.⁶ Instead my purpose is to hold *what is written* in Chapter One to some minimum standards of logic, and show that it does not meet them. In doing so it is necessary to infer something of the premises underpinning the initial steps of Clausewitz's argument—as they pertain to the ontology of war and its relationship with human agency—because it would be difficult to follow his reasoning otherwise. Still, I have tried to keep such inferences to a minimum.

Thereafter I seek to show that, problems aside, Clausewitz does succeed in articulating some key insights into strategic matters. Although these are obscured by the attendant muddle, they are nevertheless there to be picked out. Demonstrating this involves a brief foray into the fields of political philosophy and game theory, in order to expose a shared concern with the same strategic dynamics that Clausewitz identifies. The degree of consilience here suggests that, whatever else may be problematic about Chapter One, its strategic content is sound enough in fundamental terms. I conclude with some comments about what this might mean for the role of Clausewitz in the study of military strategy.

CLAUSEWITZ'S PROJECT

Clausewitz defines strategy as the "use of battles for the purpose of the war"—the purpose being political in nature. He also notes that this need not always involve fighting, that sometimes strategy can "use" battles merely by exploiting the threat to fight.⁷ This is helpful for present purposes because it suggests that Clausewitz understands strategy in broadly the same way that we do today. In other words, it exists at the interface between military means

and political ends, and it “works” via processes of compulsion and coercion.⁸ Having said that, Clausewitz reveals nothing much here about the underpinning dynamics of strategic choice, or about how decisions are made. To understand his views on such matters we need to begin from his engagement with the broader issue of war *tout court*.

Clausewitz remains important today because he sought to produce a trans-historical theory of war, and because he partially succeeded in doing so. He criticized the military theorists of his own time for their tendency to base grand claims on questionable foundations. Their method, he observed, was to derive principles for the conduct of war from what they considered to be its governing operational aspect. The problem was that their various candidates in this regard were overly particular, and biased towards considerations of mathematical calculability. Thus although their work might succeed in illuminating some specific aspect of warfare—the importance of troop numbers, base of operations, interior lines and the like—their resulting theories lacked anything approaching general applicability.⁹ Clausewitz considered that the way to avoid problems of this kind was to begin from a more fundamental starting-point. As such, his own preferred method was to deduce principles of war, not from some partial aspect of military operations, but from the nature of war itself—or at least what he considered its nature to be.

In seeking to employ the nature of war as his starting point, Clausewitz was drawing on the venerable doctrine of essentialism.¹⁰ Specifically, his ontological assumption was that all instances of *X* share a unique and unvarying essence that is responsible for their identity as members of the category *X*. This led him to assume that the manifest properties of *X* are logically entailed by its essence, and that any causal powers *X* possesses are similarly entailed by these properties. In other words, not only do essences determine the properties of things, but they also endow them with determinate powers—powers, that is, whose modes of operation must be understood and accommodated in the process of turning them to instrumental account.¹¹ It is therefore easy to appreciate why Clausewitz would have found

such a doctrine congenial. To state the essence of war would (at least in principle) permit him to deduce its causal powers, from which he would (again in principle) be able to deduce the single valid account of how one should conduct it. Indeed, it was in this spirit that he viewed the “scientific” aspect of his project as residing in “the endeavour to investigate the essence of military phenomena, to grasp their connection with the nature of the things from which they proceed”, and that he likewise describes “clear ideas” about strategy as those that “are logically connected to their underlying necessity.”¹²

Starting Point

Clausewitz’s essentialism is evident in the title of Chapter One, which, appropriately enough, asks “What is War?”¹³ In answering this question he proposes to restrict himself to the essence [*Element*] of the matter, which he characterizes as a duel.

War is nothing but a duel on a grander scale. Were we to consider as a single unit the countless individual duels that comprise a war, we should do well to imagine two wrestlers. Each strives by means of physical force to make the other do his will; his *immediate* aim is to *cast down* his adversary, thereby rendering him incapable of offering further resistance.

*War is, therefore, an act of force intended to compel our adversary to do our will.*¹⁴

Clausewitz effectively derives three key properties of war from this starting point: the means (force); the end (compulsion); and an adversary.¹⁵ From here he attempts to deduce necessary consequences for the conduct of war, the result being some of the best-known passages in his book.¹⁶ In brief, the resort to force by two opposed parties should always produce extreme efforts as each side seeks to impose its will on the other. More specifically, each side should endeavour to disarm its adversary as rapidly as possible, out of concern to avoid being disarmed itself. This should also entail each side employing maximum force in a bid to

compress its military operations into the shortest possible time. Military victory should, in other words, go to the side that applies the greater force in the shorter time. According to Clausewitz the logical conclusion of this rush to extremes is the state of “absolute” war, which he characterizes (perhaps with the analogy of a capacitor in mind) as an instantaneous discharge of force.¹⁷ The strategic prescription that emerges at this preliminary stage of his argument is that, regardless of the political differences giving rise to war, one should always pursue its absolute form.

War: Absolute and Real

One of the most interesting things about the idea of absolute war is the trouble it caused Clausewitz, even as it sparked in his mind new insights about his subject more generally. The problem lies in the disjuncture between absolute war, and war as it is conducted in reality. Thus far Clausewitz’s theory can accommodate only two states of being: peace and absolute war. And yet the conduct of real war, as revealed by the historical record, always falls substantially short of the absolute. It occupies, in other words, a space between peace and absolute war whose existence his theory at this point denies.¹⁸

Clausewitz seeks to explain this disjuncture by arguing that the pursuit of absolute war requires inordinate effort. This effort is frequently too great in proportion to our desired ends, and consequently we baulk at making it. Instead we look for ways of furthering our goals at more manageable cost, and reality offers us certain opportunities in this respect. Firstly, real wars are not disembodied affairs fought in a historical vacuum. Rather, they occur in the light of precedents that help us anticipate how earnestly our adversary will pursue absolute war this time around, and that encourage us to adjust our own efforts accordingly. Secondly, armed forces are dispersed across space and time, meaning that our adversary will experience delays in committing the forces he proposes to use. These delays will likely allow us to rectify any initial shortfalls that subsequently become evident in relation to our own military efforts. At

least initially, therefore, we can afford to practise moderation in this respect. Thirdly, Clausewitz contends that any consequences suffered as a result of defeat in war might plausibly be reversed at some future date; nothing is final in this regard. Together these three “modifications in reality” encourage rational, utility-maximizing belligerents to temper their pursuit of the absolute on grounds that their adversaries will likely be willing to reciprocate in kind. In this manner, claims Clausewitz, the political stakes that give rise to war are allowed entry into strategic calculations, governing decisions about military objectives and commitment of force. This explains how wars can involve military action at any point on a spectrum ranging from the unlimited use of force at one end, to armed observation at the other.¹⁹

But note what has happened here. Having begun with the intention of deducing his theory from the essence of war itself, Clausewitz almost immediately finds it necessary to introduce a range of incidental factors (his modifications) in order to align his deductions with intransigent reality. These modifications are intuitively plausible as sources of moderation over military action in their own right. From an essentialist perspective, however, the need to introduce them indicates a problem with his initial definition of war and/or his deductions from this starting point. His next step, moreover, only serves to compound the situation.

Offence and Defence

Having claimed to explain the disparity between absolute and real war, Clausewitz now contradicts himself by pointing to another disjuncture between theory and practice that is not resolved by his three modifications—namely that real war involves periodic inaction on both sides. This, he argues, should not be so because any circumstances that promote inaction by one side also provide an opportunity for the other side to exploit via continued action. Quite apart from his foregoing modifications, therefore, action in war should never be suspended.

The tight coupling between action and reaction remains in place, keeping us on the fast track to absolute war.

Clausewitz seeks to resolve this additional disparity with reference to the influence of defensive operations in war. The defensive, he argues, is stronger than the offensive form of war. Consequently the weaker of two belligerents may adopt a defensive posture to offset the advantages enjoyed by a more powerful adversary. In such circumstances, this adversary may not be strong enough to attack the defender with confidence of success, and will therefore halt operations until circumstances change for the better. Meanwhile, the weaker side cannot exploit this opportunity by switching to the offensive without sacrificing the advantages associated with its defensive posture. Consequently both sides temporarily suspend military action.²⁰

But whilst the superior strength of the defensive can explain inaction in real war, it does so only by further undermining Clausewitz's essentialism. As Azar Gat has noted, Clausewitz never satisfactorily explains what it is about war *itself* that makes the defensive stronger than the offensive. To be sure, he does elsewhere contend that a benefit that "arises solely from the nature of war, derives from the advantage of position, which tends to favour the defence." But this can only be an argument about incidental factors, because war is not always fought upon terrain that lends itself to such an explanation. War at sea can be fought defensively in the absence of such terrain, as can war in the air.²¹ Here, therefore, is additional evidence of some fault in Clausewitz's argument.

War Games

Evidently undaunted by the problems left in his wake, Clausewitz moves on to discuss the role played by incomplete knowledge in restraining the conduct of war. Neither side can know everything about the other's dispositions, he observes. As such, misjudgements about the situation can lead to false conclusions about which side possesses the initiative. One side

might, therefore, pause when it would have been better served by pressing on. Clausewitz acknowledges that misjudgements of this kind could as easily contribute to an unwarranted acceleration of military operations, as to an unwarranted pause. He argues, however, that human nature is more likely to overestimate threats than underestimate them, with the result that incomplete knowledge tends disproportionately to slow operations. This, in its turn, works to dilute the escalatory relationship between action and reaction by providing more time for mistakes to be corrected. And in doing so, it encourages the expenditure of military efforts in accordance with real-world calculations of probability rather than abstract conceptions of necessity. War from this perspective, concludes Clausewitz, resembles nothing so much as a game of cards where chance figures prominently in the outcome.²²

As with his treatment of attack and defence, however, the problem here is that Clausewitz bases the influence of incomplete knowledge on something external to war itself—namely human nature. It is because people are prone to exaggerate threats, rather than anything intrinsic to war as such, that military decisions are further removed from the realm of logical necessity. To be sure, appeals to human nature as explanations for behaviour are not in themselves necessarily problematic. The issue in this case is really one of consistency. The seemingly *ad hoc* introduction of human nature at this point begs questions about its relevance to the previous stages of Clausewitz's argument.

*War as a Continuation of Politics (or Policy)*²³

By now, Clausewitz's essentialism is well and truly buried under a mass of incidental factors. These are, moreover, piled hodgepodge one upon the other, seemingly in the order they occurred to him, the overall result being as inelegant as it is unconvincing. How, then, does he seek to extricate himself from this awkward position? He effectively switches ontological horses in mid-stream, by re-defining war as "merely the continuation of politics by other means."²⁴ Here, in other words, he explicitly contradicts his initial essentialism by claiming

that war is actually an expression of some other more fundamental activity. As Clausewitz himself puts it, “war is never *something autonomous*. Rather, it should be regarded as a tool of politics, and only by considering it as such can we avoid coming into conflict with the whole of military history.”²⁵ The problem here hardly needs highlighting: in his effort to keep himself aligned with history, he ends up with two incompatible definitions of the same thing. War as a heteronymous “continuation of politics” is set against war as an autonomous “act of force”. Logically, one cannot subscribe to both these definitions; one of them (if not both) must be incorrect.

The Trinity

And thus, by fits and starts, we finally arrive at Clausewitz’s third—“trinitarian”—definition of war as a product of its three “ruling tendencies”: reason, chance and passion. The trinity has been the subject of much debate in recent years. This, however, has focused on its salience within Clausewitz’s overall conception of war, rather than its relationship with his prior theoretical commitments—or, for that matter, its internal coherence. For some it is his key insight into the theory of war; for others it is nothing more than a historically situated observation on the character of early-nineteenth-century warfare.²⁶ This latter position seems to stem from a misreading of the text. In practice Clausewitz merely seeks to clarify his account of the trinity’s components by reference to the interstate wars of his own time. Hence chance he equates with the environment in which generals and their armies operate; reason with the political realm of government, and passion with the influence of popular involvement in the war.²⁷ Thus to maintain, as some have, that the trinity refers only to warfare between states—to warfare, that is, in which there exist clear divisions between army, government and people—is incorrect. The trinity’s more general expression as chance, reason and passion is meant to capture a much more fundamental set of dynamics.

Nevertheless, claims that the trinity is Clausewitz's key theoretical insight are difficult to accept. Partly this is because it characterizes war as an emergent property of the interactions between three independent variables, which once again puts it at odds with his essentialist starting point. And partly it is because his comparison of the theory of war with a magnet suspended between the three poles of chance, reason and passion is unhelpful on its own terms. The implication here is that each of these poles will vary in strength over time, such that the magnet will be pulled hither and thither, now closer to one of them, now to another. The problem with this image is that it establishes a mutually exclusive relationship between chance, reason and passion: to be increasingly influenced by one of them is to be decreasingly influenced by the others, and vice versa. The reality of war suggests otherwise. Belligerents can be both passionate and reasonable; they can possess, in other words, a terrible sense of purpose. And nor is reason or passion self-evidently incompatible with a run of bad luck.

Some scholars have abandoned talk of poles and magnets in favour of a hierarchical relationship between the trinity's components. From this perspective, the popular passions generated by war are ordered into efficient military activity (in the face of chance) for use under the guidance of political reason. Not only do formulations of this kind dispense with the image of war wandering around between three mutually exclusive poles, but they also suggest a meaningful distinction between war as a continuation of politics and of policy. Here the popular passions generated by war may be considered a function of the political complexion of the belligerents (for example: eighteenth-century dynastic states versus nineteenth-century nation-states) whilst the conduct of military operations is shaped to conform with their specific policy goals.²⁸ Note, though, that reformulating the trinity in this manner is achieved at the cost of shifting the means of war from physical, to moral, force. This is problematic given Clausewitz's early assertion that the latter has no place within his original conception of war, there being "no moral force apart from the concepts of states and law".²⁹

A Logical Error

It is curious, therefore, that Clausewitz pronounced himself satisfied with the first chapter of *On War*. To be sure, it remains one of the most important treatments of the relationship between politics and war we possess. It contains passages of unsurpassed insight in this regard. And yet these passages remain isolated islands of lucidity, unconnected by any coherent line of argument. The serial re-characterization of war—which starts from an essentialist position and ends with more than a whiff of constructivism about it—does not work in this regard.

How, then, did Clausewitz get himself into this position? To answer this question we first need to appreciate that he made a logical error at an early stage in his argument. Having deduced from his original definition of war that the use of force tends to extremes (as each side endeavours to out-match the other) he then proceeds to argue that this dynamic interplay necessarily rules out self-imposed moderation in relation to war's conduct. Even under circumstances in which the prospect of disarmament might reasonably be expected to bring about an early surrender by one side, the other must not renege on its extreme efforts. All military action must, in other words, accord with the goal of disarming one's adversary as rapidly as possible. From here it is but a short distance to the concept of absolute war. But as W. B. Gallie once observed, it is erroneous to argue that the possibility of an adversary's early surrender *cannot* influence military action; the most we are entitled to assert in this regard is that it *need* not. Indeed, if the possibility exists of an early surrender by one side, the other is logically bound to consider whether extreme military action (given the likely costs) is warranted under these circumstances.³⁰

It was this misstep that directed Clausewitz down a false path to absolute war, thereby distancing his theory from historical practice. And it was his failure to recognize this mistake that resulted in his problematic attempts to redress matters. Had he originally realized that war's tendency to extremes of violence does not logically preclude limited military efforts, he might have spared himself much nugatory work. He would have needed to begin anew, with a

revised concept of war that captures its status as both an act of force and a continuation of politics. But, by keeping politics firmly in the picture, he would have supplied himself with a countervailing influence against the rush to absolute war, thereby removing the need for this latter concept. Exactly what this revised position on war might have looked like is interesting to consider but need not detain us here, our concern being with strategy rather than war *per se*.

THE CHALLENGE OF STRATEGY

The important point for our purposes is that a compound (force/politics) idea of war would likely have served to clarify what Clausewitz evidently considers the fundamental challenge of military strategy—which is to determine how much military effort is warranted in any given instance of war.³¹ Over the course of Chapter One, he shifts position on this question. As war morphs from an act of force into a continuation of politics, so too does the focus move from compulsion (via force applied) to coercion (via force threatened). And with it, the optimum level of force required moves from the maximum possible to the minimum necessary. Consequently—but not very obviously—military strategy emerges as a matter of striking the optimum balance in this regard. On the one hand, too little effort will fail to coerce whilst handing military opportunities to the enemy; on the other, too much effort will render the costs of fighting disproportionately high in relation to the political benefits stemming from victory. Thus decisions about military effort should reflect as faithfully as possible the value each side attaches to achieving its political ends, which is why Clausewitz contends that “the first and most comprehensive of all strategic questions” is to understand the motivations shaping the character of the war we are about to embark on.³² Only by judging correctly in this regard can we gain an accurate sense of how far we may depart from our maximum military effort without running undue risks of defeat.

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND GAME THEORY

In this section I present some alternative strategic formulations that are nevertheless compatible with Clausewitz's position on strategy as set out above. These formulations are associated with the fields of political philosophy and game theory, in both of which strategy emerges as a response to the tension that exists between the competing imperatives of self-preservation and co-operation under anarchy. As such, they provide clearer and more concise accounts of the dynamics underpinning strategic decision-making than does Clausewitz. Nevertheless the degree of consilience they all share suggests that, whatever else may be problematic in Clausewitz's account of war, his basic strategic insights are sound.

Thomas Hobbes famously characterizes war as the condition of humankind under anarchy. In the absence of political authority, he argues, interpersonal relations are prone to violence. Where no mechanism exists for policing behaviour, people are constantly faced with the fear of violent death; to meet a stranger is to confront the possible source of one's own demise. Thus when such a threat presents itself, the temptation is to remove it by means of pre-emptive attack—even if co-operation would otherwise be desirable. Little wonder, then, that Hobbes views human co-operation as extremely difficult, if not wholly impossible, under anarchy. Co-operation in these circumstances implies that force be withheld. This in turn implies a willingness to accept some degree of risk, for we cannot guarantee that restraint on our part will be reciprocated in kind. Hobbes resolves this tension by means of the state, an overarching and impartial power capable of punishing aggression by its citizens. Under these circumstances, co-operation between individuals is more readily achieved because restraint in one's dealings with others no longer confers the same degree of vulnerability as it did under anarchy. We can withhold violence, and extend co-operation, confident that others will do likewise.³³

As Hobbes himself acknowledges, his solution to the problem of anarchy does not so much dispel it as move it elsewhere. Whereas co-operation is possible within states, it is more

difficult between states because there is no sovereign body above them. Accordingly, each of them must be careful around its neighbours. Hobbes is not really concerned with inter-state relations although he does pause to register his perception of their general character, in the process making *Leviathan* a foundational text for Realists.

Kings, and Persons of Sovereigne authority, because of their Independency, are in continuall jealousies, and in the state and posture of Gladiators; having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another; that is, their Forts, Garrisons, and Guns upon the Frontiers of their Kingdomes; and continuall Spyes upon their neighbours, which is a posture of War.³⁴

Even here, however, Hobbes hints at some reasons why states may not experience the logic of pre-emptive violence as acutely as individuals. Not every citizen need be a spy; a division of labour is possible here leaving the majority free to do other things. Additionally, fortified frontiers can buy time for full mobilization to occur after war breaks out. This removes the requirement for states to maintain their forces on hair-trigger alert, in the process reducing the perceived threat they represent to their neighbours. Thus, although for Hobbes humanity never transcends its egoistic nature, political and material structures can serve to ameliorate the negative consequences of this.

Hobbes' account of the tension between self-preservation and co-operation is not the only one in this tradition. David Hume also analyses a number of analogous situations, even if they are not framed in quite so dramatic a manner. One of these involves two rowers who must both contribute physical effort in order to make progress in a shared boat. Both appreciate as much, but both also realize their own effort will be wasted should their partner not respond in kind. In this latter case the boat will make no progress, but the non-rower will at least be better off than the rower on account of not having wasted any effort. Thus although the optimum outcome is for both to bend to their oars, mutual suspicion means that neither will

necessarily do so. Hume does not invoke the state to put a stop to such problems. Instead he notes that people in boats co-operate in accordance with an unspoken agreement or convention. As rational beings we can discern the long-term advantages associated with forming and observing such conventions in terms of the superior co-operative outcomes they make possible. Although we may remain desirous of making immediate gains at the expense of others, reason dictates otherwise.³⁵ Hume, in other words, provides a more optimistic account of our nature than does Hobbes. Conventions serve to extend and reinforce our co-operative tendencies, rather than to police or otherwise obstruct purely egoistic behaviour. If Hobbes is a realist then Hume is more akin to a liberal institutionalist: he believes in the potency of social facts.

For his part, Jean Jacques Rousseau addresses the tension between self-preservation and co-operation by means of a scenario known as the “Stag Hunt”. Only if two people hunt co-operatively can they hope to catch a stag. There are also hares around, and each hunter stands a good chance of bagging one alone. Going after a hare will, however, alert any nearby stags to their peril, thereby ensuring the other hunter catches nothing. Thus even though a stag would provide more meals than a hare, each hunter will be tempted to go after the latter in order to minimize the risk of catching nothing at all.³⁶ For Rousseau the Stag Hunt exemplifies the corrupting nature of social relations in action, as individuals learn to predicate their own behaviour on the anticipated behaviour of others for purposes of self-preservation.

I mention Rousseau here because his Stag Hunt has since been formalized by game-theorists with a related interest in the prospects for co-operation amidst conflict. In this regard they might just as well have taken inspiration from Hobbes or Hume, because all three philosophers are addressing instances of what such theorists might describe as *interdependent choice under uncertainty*.³⁷ In game theory, our choices are said to be interdependent when our optimum course of action depends on the choices available to our adversary. Identifying this optimum course of action therefore requires that we anticipate our adversary’s response and

allow for it in our deliberations. And in doing so we must recognize that this response will, in its turn, be governed by his expectations about how we shall respond to him. Under these circumstances the uncertainty resides in the other party's ultimate intentions: we cannot be sure exactly what he wishes to achieve, and thus what choices he will make in response to ours. What Hobbes, Hume and Rousseau are saying—and what game theory likewise demonstrates—is that this uncertainty encourages prudent choices calculated to minimize the harm that another party's actions can cause us, rather than choices intended to maximize the benefits we can achieve through co-operation. We eschew actions predicated on the assumption of co-operation in favour of those calculated to protect us against the worst consequences of such assumptions proving wrong. We attack rather than befriend; we refuse to row rather than combining our efforts; we hunt hare rather than stag.

We can relate these concerns back to military matters via Thomas Schelling's famous work on strategic stability, because the scenarios he discusses are fundamentally identical to those described above. Two powers locked in a nuclear standoff may have no desire for war, given the terrible consequences for all involved. But in order to forgo war, both sides must be confident they are not vulnerable to a surprise attack capable of disarming them. In the absence of such confidence, the temptation will be to attack first in order to forestall the other's attack—even if war is otherwise highly undesirable. This leads Schelling to recommend various initiatives calculated to bolster stability. Reliable early-warning systems should reduce the possibility of surprise; well-protected retaliatory forces should reduce the chances of being disarmed—as should a mutual commitment to eschew highly accurate weapons capable of counter-force missions, in favour of less-accurate alternatives capable only of destroying cities. Under these conditions there should be less incentive to strike first because neither side could hope to disarm the other and thereby prevent him from retaliating. Schelling is, in other words, advocating the creation of structural impediments to behaviour capable of reducing the

mutual fear of surprise attack.³⁸ In the absence of a leviathan, he recommends the implementation of a technical fix.

BACK TO CLAUSEWITZ

With the foregoing matters in mind, it seems clear enough that the opening chapter of *On War* provides us with Clausewitz's own attempt to think through the military ramifications of interdependent choice under uncertainty. His overarching argument is confused and lacks clarity, but his ideas on strategy that emerge from the muddle display a high degree of consilience with those of Hobbes *et al.* The use of force in war tends to extremes because we are concerned to avoid being outdone in this regard by our adversary. Concurrently, we both wish to restrain the costs of fighting so as to maximize the net benefit associated with achieving our chosen political ends. In principle, therefore, it may be possible for both sides to co-operate by moderating their military efforts in light of the political sacrifices they require of each other. Following Gallie, the situation need not elicit extreme efforts on both sides; much depends on how confidently each party can reasonably expect that its own self-restraint will be reciprocated in kind.

On this latter point Clausewitz is particularly insightful. He notes that strategic choices rest not on logical generalizations so much as on specific data about the concrete circumstances at hand. This data will, however, be incomplete, creating an uncertain picture whose gaps must be filled via the exercise of judgement. As Clausewitz himself puts it, from "the character, the institutions, the condition, the circumstances of the adversary, each side will anticipate, in accordance with the laws of probability, the likely actions of the other and determine his own accordingly."³⁹ Much, therefore, will depend on how accurate our judgements turn out to be.⁴⁰

The influence of Clausewitz's "modifications in reality" fit readily enough into this framework. Paying attention to an adversary's previous behaviour in analogous situations may help reduce uncertainty about what to expect this time around; the unfolding of operations in

space and time provides opportunities to infer enemy intentions and revise one's own efforts accordingly; the prospect of enemy gains being reversed at some future date can reconcile the losing side to cut costs and recognize defeat. So too can the advantages accruing to the defence provide opportunities for limiting one's efforts without becoming unacceptably vulnerable to a knock-out blow.

CONCLUSION

Clausewitz has a great deal to tell us about war in general, and also about its strategic dimension. It has not been my intention to argue otherwise. Nevertheless, the initial chapter of *On War* is not the best starting place for those wishing to understand the dynamics of strategic interaction. Clausewitz, it is true, does eventually hit upon these dynamics, but the reasoning that led him there lacks clarity because it is unsound. Gallie, whilst complimentary about other aspects of Clausewitz's theorizing, characterized his attempts to reconcile absolute and real war as "an ideal hunting ground for students of philosophical logic", and it is difficult to disagree with him in this regard.⁴¹

What, then, does this mean for Clausewitz's place in the study of military strategy? It seems to me that we should not follow him in seeking to deduce our understanding of strategic fundamentals from the nature of war itself. On the contrary, we might well do better to treat war (or, at any rate, warfare) as a particular expression of strategic interaction. This much is implied in our earlier discussion of political philosophy and game theory, which drew attention to the general phenomenon of interdependent choice under uncertainty, and to the presence of analogous ideas in Clausewitz's thinking. In doing so we are not rejecting his teachings outright, but basing our study of strategy on clearer and more concise foundations. Having done so, we should then turn to Clausewitz for his profound insights into the specifics of strategic interaction in military contexts. To revisit the opening passage of this essay: we should not seek to go beyond Clausewitz, so much as begin somewhere else first.

NOTES

1. My text is Werner Hahlweg's 19th critical edition of *Vom Kriege* (Bonn: Dümmler, 1980). Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
2. Henri de Jomini, *Précis de l'Art de la Guerre* (Paris: n. p., 1838); B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Ghost of Napoleon* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933).
3. John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London: Pimlico, 1994); Martin van Creveld, *On Future War* (London: Brassey's, 1991). The question of Clausewitz's relevance to contemporary warfare has subsequently generated an extensive literature. For a review see Bart Schuurman, "Clausewitz and the 'New Wars' Scholars," *Parameters*, Spring 2010: 89-100. The recent English-language translation of Clausewitz's writings on "small war" are also interesting in this respect, because they demonstrate that he was interested in guerrilla operations, and had sketched out a theory of them, prior to writing *On War*. Carl von Clausewitz, *Clausewitz on Small War*, trans. and ed. Christopher Daase and James W. Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Aspects of these earlier writings are evident in *Vom Kriege*, 799-806.
4. On his satisfaction with the first chapter see Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 181.
5. Raymond Aron, "Clausewitz's Conceptual System," *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 1 (1974): 49.
6. For example: Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Azar Gat, *The Origins of Military Thought from the Enlightenment to Clausewitz* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989); Beatrice Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz* (London: Pimlico, 2002).
7. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 345, 351-2.
8. Here compulsion involves destruction of an enemy's means of resistance, whilst coercion involves threatening costs that are disproportionately high in relation to the value an enemy places on achieving his desired goals. Clausewitz's understanding of strategy also embraces the military activity associated with its practical realization—or what we today term the *operational* level of war. Nevertheless, he clearly views this activity as emerging from the interplay of political and military imperatives.
9. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 279-83.
10. On essentialism see Andrew Sayer, "Essentialism, Social Constructionism, and Beyond," *The Sociological Review* vol. 45 (1997): 453-87.
11. These days essentialism and determinism are frequently contrasted with the idea of *social constructivism*, which holds that the character and causal powers of things are at least partly extrinsic products of human interpretation rather than intrinsic properties of the things themselves. Strictly speaking this makes constructivism an epistemological, rather than ontological, position because it implies agnosticism about essences. For a lively account of such matters see Keith Grint and Steve Woolgar, *The Machine at Work: Technology, Work and Organization* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997).
12. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 184, 182.
13. Moreover the title of Book I is "The Nature of War".

14. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 191-2, with original emphasis. Elsewhere (pp. 222, 269) he characterizes war's essence as fighting, which is a roughly compatible position.
15. *Ibid.* Although he explicitly mentions only the means and the ends in this context.
16. *Ibid.* 192-5.
17. *On War* is littered with analogies drawn from the emerging science of physics. Other examples include "friction", "culminating point" and "centre of gravity".
18. In their 1976 translation of Clausewitz, Michael Howard and Peter Paret conflate absolute and total war. This is unhelpful because they are not the same thing. Whereas the former is the imaginary end-point of Clausewitz's deductive reasoning, the latter (as characterized by the likes of Eric Ludendorff) is a historical category of action. In this regard it is also worth observing that whilst absolute war results from the compression of military action in time, total war involves extending it through time. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); General [Eric] Ludendorff, *Der Totale Krieg* (München: Ludendorffs Verlag, 1935).
19. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 195-201.
20. *Ibid.*, 201-6.
21. Azar Gat, "Clausewitz on Defence and Attack," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 11 (1988): 23, citing Howard and Paret's translation.
22. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 206-8.
23. It is not always clear whether Clausewitz means politics or policy, because the German *Politik* does duty for both.
24. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 210.
25. *Ibid.*, 212, with original emphasis.
26. Edward J. Villacres and Christopher Bassford, "Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity," *Parameters*, vol. 25 (Autumn 1995), 9-19; cf. van Creveld, *op cit.*
27. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 212-3.
28. Philip Windsor, *Strategic Thinking: An Introduction and Farewell*, ed. Mats Berdal and Spyros Economides (London: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 29.
29. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 192.
30. W. B. Gallie, *Philosophers of Peace and War: Kant, Clausewitz, Marx, Engels and Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 56-7.
31. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 347.
32. *Ibid.*, 212.
33. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 86-90.
34. *Ibid.*, 90.

35. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner (London: Penguin, 1985), 541-2.
36. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Discours Sur l'Origine et les Fondemens de l'Inégalité Parmi les Hommes* (Amsterdam: Marc Michel Rey, 1755), 103.
37. For applications of game theory to Hobbes see the introduction to Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: With Selected Variants From the Latin Edition of 1668*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994). In relation to Hume see Peter Vanderschraaf, "The Informal Game Theory in Hume's Account of Convention," *Economics and Philosophy*, vol. 14 (1998): 215-47.
38. Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 230-54.
39. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 199-200.
40. In this respect Clausewitz's grasp of the importance of real-world context for shaping strategic decisions is arguably sounder than Schelling's. For criticism of the latter's tendency to remain at the level of theoretical abstractions see Richard Ned Lebow, "Reason Divorced from Reality: Thomas Schelling and Strategic Bargaining," *International Politics*, vol. 43 (2006): 429-52.
41. Gallie, 56.